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The Best of People
and Other Short Stories

By

MARGARET B. SMITH



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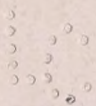
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To My Mother
These Stories
Are Lovingly Dedicated
—*The Author*

The Best of People

A Satire in Four Chapters

Chapter I



LESLIE PERRY was one of those poor unfortunate creatures who are born of selfish and worldly mothers. Girls who are taught from childhood, that money is the greatest of powers. Girls who are brought up with the one idea that luxury and pleasure are the most essential things of life, and that to obtain them, one must possess both beauty and brains.

Leslie at nineteen was certainly pretty, small and slim and vivid. She had tawny hair and very engaging blue eyes. Her cheeks were naturally pink, and her lips full and red as a ripe cherry. But above all, Leslie was clever. Her mother had schooled her daughter along certain lines and carefully drilled her through long lessons of social graces. Leslie was warned not to forget for a single moment that she was a Palmer Perry, or that her great-grandfather had helped sign the Declaration of Independence.

As a youngster, Leslie had been a rather nice little thing, sweet tempered and very democratic. Once she had been caught dividing a cookie with the laundress' daughter, and again giving her gold beads to the window-cleaning man.

Mrs. Perry saw to it, however, that when the girl Leslie made her bow to society she was a cold-hearted, extremely self-contained young person.

Leslie's coming out party was a great success, and was followed by a brilliant, eventful winter at

Palm Beach. Mrs. Perry kept open house there, and watched with approval the popularity of her only child. Leslie was, indeed, doing credit to her training now; she encouraged but the richest and most desirable of her suitors—and, especially, Billy Ballord did she favor.

Billy had not merely a fine family tree to display. He had golden dollars and a very bright future in business with his father. William Ballord, Sr., was president of the Ballord Rubber & Tire Works, and Billy was sole heir to the family millions.

Mrs. Perry remarked to her husband one day:

"Mr. Ballord is so attentive to Leslie, my dear. I do think that it will end in a match before long. They are so devoted to one another."

Mr. Perry, a very blunt little man, with a red face and bald head, replied quite nastily:

"Leslie's devoted to his father's bank account you mean, Clara. Well, all I can say is that it's about time she got another lunch ticket to go by. I'm pretty nearly in bankruptcy, myself, with her dressmaker's bills and florist's charges coming in regularly. That girl is some expensive proposition to keep up, believe me!"

Mrs. Perry ignored this purely spiteful remark.

"Mr. Ballord is very thoughtful of me, too," she purred at length. "Of all the young men that come to the house, he's quite the nicest one, George."

George did not look at all impressed. He merely grunted and chewed the end of his cigar viciously.

"For heaven sakes, Clara, don't call that string bean a man! Why, without his father's influence he couldn't get a position anywhere."

Mrs. George Palmer Perry's pride would permit her to remain no longer and listen to such gross

insults. She rose to her feet and sailed majestically across the room.

Mr. Perry's jeering words followed her through the door.

"I pity the poor chap if he marries our daughter. Leslie'll sure lead him a song and a dance."

In the parlor, Mrs. Perry encountered the object of the discussion and her daughter.

At a glance, Mr. Billy Ballord appeared to be all arms, legs and necktie. He was a tall youth and pitifully thin, with mild brown eyes, behind large gold-rimmed spectacles. Billy's claim to attention lay solely through his father's money. Mr. Perry was entirely right on that point. Billy was too shy and unimposing to cut much of a figure anywhere by himself. While at school, he was the class goat and nicknamed "Rubberneck" by his playmates who, nevertheless, all liked him thoroughly despite the fact he was generally thought to be a little "queer" at times.

Leslie spoke to her mother briskly.

"Billy has just asked me to become his wife." Billy advanced a step forward and cleared his throat.

"I know I can make your daughter happy," he said very shyly, glancing at Leslie adoringly.

"We have decided on September," Leslie proceeded, for of the two she was boss and usually did Billy's thinking for him. "We will be married from our church in Yonkers and have a reception afterward from our own home. Not a large wedding, mother, just a few of the most select people."

"Certainly dear." Mrs. Perry was very well pleased indeed by the arrangement. Leslie's marriage to Billy Ballord would mean a feather in her cap socially.

"I had thought of a little home or apartment in the city," Billy began bashfully, "for Leslie and I won't be entertaining much at first, you know."

He pictured as he spoke, Leslie and himself alone together in a cozy little house. Leslie, all in white, presiding at the breakfast table, and pouring out his coffee for him.

"Nonsense dear," Leslie said firmly. "You do have the queerest ideas, Billy! We'll live at the Biltmore in the winter and go to Bar Harbor for the summer months. A house is entirely too much trouble to run these days."

Billy sighed submissively and when he finally took his departure, Leslie remarked irritably to her mother:

"I wish he was not so dreadfully plain and old-fashioned. Imagine mother, Billy expected me to actually make a slave of myself keeping house for him!"

Mrs. Perry replied sagely nodding her head:

"You've good control of him, my dear; there's no need for worry while Billy is so deeply in love with you."

"Oh yes," Leslie smiled slightly. "But I do get so tired of him sometimes. Why could not Rodney Blake or someone interesting have had his money, I'd like to know?"

Chapter II

When Billy Ballord told his father that he was going to marry Leslie Perry, the older man shook his head and looked very grave indeed.

"That girl may be all right, understand me, Lucy," he said to his pretty, gentle little wife, "but I have my doubts as to what kind of a wife she'll be."

William Ballord, Sr., was like his son, an old-fashioned character. He cared little for display or the so-called smart society and was devoted to his home and family. A good, honest, upright man who stood frankly and proudly for all that was best; this was Billy's father.

"I'm sure, daddy, Leslie is a competent and sensible girl," Mrs. Ballord ventured, "and Billy is certainly fond of her. She's very pretty and has charming manners." The little woman hesitated for a moment. "Perhaps, she can bring Billy out more after they are married. The boy is so shy and ill at ease before people."

"That's all right, mother," Mr. Ballord said in his big, hearty voice. "Billy may be a bit raw, but he gets there just the same, you notice. He may not be a lady killer, but I'm mighty proud of him just the same, for he's a fine wholesome lad."

"And he won Leslie," Mrs. Ballord said with eager eyes, "after she had refused several very good-looking young chaps, Rodney Blake and Jack Harrison, for instance."

Mr. Ballord remained silent. He knew that Leslie Perry did not love his plain, simple-hearted son. The girl was a mixture of conscious cleverness and inherent conceit. She wanted plenty of money and a free hand to do what she pleased with it.

Again William Ballord shook his head. He knew more of the world and the world's ways than did honest, trusting Billy.

Chapter III

The wedding was a great social event. The Perry house in Yonkers, a huge stone edifice which passersby often mistook for a memorial building, was thrown open to entertain some of the country's best people.

Leslie made a very pretty bride, and the reception that followed the ceremony was a grand affair where there were more footmen than guests and more splendor than comfort.

Mrs. Perry was cordiality itself; she seemed to be everywhere at once, giving orders to the caterers, attending to her guests' needs and receiving new and late arrivals.

The only person who did not appear to be enjoying himself was the bridegroom. Poor Billy was on tenterhooks. He was hot and uncomfortable in his dress suit and very bashful and ill at ease. He danced two dances with Leslie and spent the rest of the evening backed against the wall, watching his butterfly wife go by in the arms of others. Leslie was a good dancer. She had been taught the latest steps before her alphabet as a child. On the other hand Billy had always detested dancing school. He had never been popular with the girls there, although they had certainly been nice to him, and had laughed only behind his back at the numerous blunders he had made.

Mrs. Perry came up to her son-in-law once during the evening.

"Why are you not dancing, Billy?" she inquired, and he looked at her miserably.

"I—I can't very well, and I'd rather stay here and watch the rest of them," he replied lamely.

And so passed Billy's wedding night.

Chapter IV

January found the Billy Ballords established in their new home, a suite of rooms at the hotel Biltmore. Leslie insisted on having a bedroom, bath and boudoir to herself, and Billy gladly gave them

to her. Then, again, Leslie wanted a Rolls-Royce and an ermine opera cloak.

"Certainly dear, I'll see about them at once," Billy promised her, and Leslie kissed him and declared that he was the dearest boy in the world.

"Roddy Blake is going to the theatre with us tonight," Leslie informed him. "So please stop at the box office and get another ticket for him on your way home from the office."

A shadow passed over Billy's face, but it was gone in a minute. He wished that Leslie would not invite Rodney Blake to accompany them everywhere they went. Roddy, of course, was a nice enough fellow, but somehow or other, Billy never felt the least bit comfortable when he was around. He reminded him of a woman, did Roddy, with his soft purring voice and small manicured hands. Roddy was always dressed in the height of fashion and reeked of perfume and talcum powder. He had never made a dollar in his life and was continually being shown off at teas and at card parties.

"I really had to ask him, for he was coming here to dinner anyway," Leslie said somewhat pettishly.

"That's all right dear, I don't mind in the least," Billy lied amiably, and Leslie as she looked into his homely, pleasant face, felt a sudden glow of affection for him.

"We'll accept your mother's invitation for dinner tomorrow evening and not go to the Cunningham dance," she said impulsively, and Billy set off for the office with a very light heart, indeed.

All day long he thought of her, and many times did he glance at her picture which was on his desk inclosed in a pretty silver frame.

Late that afternoon, although very tired, he stopped at the florist's and bought a bouquet of orchids for Leslie to wear that night.

"They'll go beautifully with my lavender gown," Leslie declared with enthusiasm when she opened the box.

"Billy, you are a dear fellow!" And she spoke with sincerity. In her mind, Leslie compared Rodney with Billy. Roddy was certainly polished and a perfect dancer, but Billy was honorable, and his unselfishness and devotion to her were sterling qualities that she knew few men possessed.

That evening, they went to a café nearby, and Leslie and Roddy soon succumbed to the bewitching languor of the music, the heavy fragrance of many flowers. The floor was perfect, the rhythm inviting, Roddy a perfect dancer. Billy as usual sat quietly watching his wife, moving gracefully about the floor in the arms of another man.

Suddenly in the middle of a waltz that she was enjoying immensely, Leslie stopped short. Roddy turned, following her astonished stare. Billy—meek and awkward, Billy—the wall-flower, Billy—the woman hater, *Billy* was gliding smoothly between the other couples, his long arm encircling the waist of a tiny, fluffy-haired vision. She was smiling up at him, and he seemed not at loss for pretty compliments.

Roddy and Leslie looked at each other wonderingly.

"And even the Best of People!——"



The Return



OLD RALSTON lived on the outskirts of a New England village in a small frame cottage, of a very dilapidated appearance. It stood back from the road and was almost hidden from view by thick bushes and hanging ivy. The lawn that it overlooked, if indeed it may be called such, was full of weeds, and the grass had not been cut for years.

Old Ralston's son John had been the last person to trim it, some four years previous. He had enlisted when war had been declared and had been reported one of the first to fall in far-away France.

When John had left home, a tall, fine-looking youth of twenty-three, town folks had said that he carried his father's heart with him. And it was quite true, they had declared later at the time of the erection of the monument in John's honor, that old Ralston's heart had died with his son.

Old Ralston was blind, a mere ghost of a man with a thin white face and wide staring, sightless eyes, a man who went hobbling about on a cane, mourning continually for what had been the greatest thing in his starved, dark life. Neighbors pitied him, and also feared him, children regarded him with curiosity and awe. There were those who thought him to be insane, and still others who made fun of the shabby old figure.

Poor old man Ralston!

Then, there came a night when a stranger arrived in town, a tall, young form in a great fur coat and muffler, with a cap pulled down far over his face. The stranger betook himself quickly to the home of

old Ralston, and knocked upon the weather-beaten door. Presently, the knock was answered by the little gray man, who asked, "Who's there? I haven't money to buy anything, if that is what you want."

The stranger replied, with a queer little smile on his lips, "I don't want to sell you anything."

The voice to old Ralston sounded strangely familiar. He put one hand out and felt the stranger's coat. Then he groped around and touched the face. "Do I know you?" he said in a puzzled tone.

The stranger steadied the tottering figure with one strong arm. "I have news for you," he responded. "Of your son—John."

There was a long silence. The sightless eyes of old man Ralston seemed to regard the stranger, and to discern in the darkness. "Is it John?" the question was low, imperative and sustained.

"It is John, father!" and he was aware that the old man's lips were moving unconsciously and forming words.

"You have come back after all! God is so good, so very good!"

Inside the still and dim room, John removed the muffler and cap. He glanced at his father. The old man was smiling for he could not see his son's face. The great war had left its mark upon it, and so had months of suffering and pain. The face that had once been so good to look upon was now horribly scarred and disfigured.

A blessing that old Ralston was blind! God is so good.



Romance and Martha Pennypacker

I



MARTHA PENNYPACKER, sitting alone on her little veranda toward the end of a June day, came suddenly to the conviction that she had missed the greatest thing in life—Romance. She had lived forty-three long years and had not experienced to the present day, a single sensation or thrill. Her existence had been one of the utmost serenity and Martha now most fervently wished that something would happen to disturb the calm and placid waters of her life.

Martha Pennypacker knew little of the world and the world's ways, but she had rather a vague sort of notion that if romance or adventure did not come to find her, she would go in search of them. She was quite determined, at any rate, not to remain a spinster in a small town all the rest of her life, if she could help it. She was approaching middle age at a dangerous rate, but her hair was still brown, and her skin unwrinkled and her sense of humor keen and unspoiled.

Martha thought these things over, and her determination grew to dig a little joy and excitement out of the old world.

The paper boy presently delivered to her the weekly journal that reached Portlow, Wyoming, some time later than its New York publication, but was, nevertheless, fully enjoyed by the residents of the sleepy little western town.

Martha seized upon it eagerly and devoured its pages of scandal, sentiment and tragedy most hungrily. Then she turned to the advertisements

and read of the wonders performed by La Belle complexion cream and De Luxe face powder. The Personal column finally claimed her attention and her eyes sought the following:

"A young gentleman of wealth and culture desires to correspond with a young lady who might have some thoughts of matrimony in the near future. Address reply and photograph to Captain Eri Price, P. O. box 120, Manchester, Rhode Island."

She studied it carefully, read and reread it until the words were stamped indelibly upon her memory. Her heart was beating furiously for she had decided to banish her foremost ideas of discretion and to enter the field of adventure.

Martha Pennypacker, a timid and highly respected spinster of Portlaw, sat down to her desk and with great pains and much consideration composed a reply. It was brief, but explicit, and her heart thrilled as she finally placed a picture of herself at twenty into the envelope and sealed and mailed it.

Martha wondered as she did so whether it would mean fate or fortune to her.

II

Captain Price received numerous replies from unknown, but eager applicants. He singled Martha's letter out from among the many he had received as being most sincere and straightforward. It appealed to him strongly, and Martha would doubtlessly have been surprised had she been able to see the eagerness with which he read it.

It was with a tinge of regret that Captain Price gazed fondly at her likeness and realized that he was no longer a young man and the absurdity of the situation he had brought upon himself. He had

written the advertisement in a fit of loneliness. Now, he regretted the step he had taken.

Eri Price was a retired sea captain. He was a man well up in his forties, stalwart and reliable, who had neglected the greater things of life to pursue the career of his forefathers.

There was still enough sportsmanship about the captain to see the matter to the finish, so he promptly responded to Martha's missive with spirit. It was a whole-souled letter that he wrote her and it brought a reply that increased his admiration and stimulated his interest.

And so it was that two lonely creatures, hundreds of miles apart, founded a romance upon total misunderstanding.

Martha lived in constant fear lest the prince charming of her dreams discover her deception. And Captain Price who had never before feared the roughest of the seas, began to feel rather uneasy about the turn of events. Finally, after serious deliberation he gained sufficient courage to wire the girl he loved that he was coming to claim her as his own.

III

Martha Pennypacker was aflutter with fear and excitement the day of Eri's anticipated arrival. She had not yet told him that she was no longer the debonair maid of twenty that he believed her to be. She was afraid to apprise him of the fact, for fear it would be the culmination of the romance of which she had so long dreamed.

Twilight had already fallen when the sound of carriage wheels on the road sent her hurrying to the door. A sudden panic seized her as she saw the vehicle draw up to her gate and the tall figure

of Captain Price emerge from it. He swung up the walk, and in a moment was on the veranda.

Martha, trembling, faced him. She saw instead of the youthful hero of her imagination, the kindly weather-beaten face of a man who was undoubtedly several years her senior.

And Captain Price found himself gazing at a charming woman who still possessed some of the rare freshness and beauty of her girlhood.

No explanations were necessary! Both Martha and Eri were gloriously happy and they turned arm in arm and entered the house together.

"We're a little late in beginning," Captain Price said in his booming voice, "but I calculate that won't hurt matters anyhow, now that our romance has a good start."



Charity



JOHN CLARKE, as he walked to church that morning along the familiar, little path that led by Cranton Hollow and the orchard, was conscious of a new feeling of great exhilaration. He felt younger and better than he had in years. His usually pale face was flushed, and his eyes had lost their look of tiredness and depression.

It was Christmas Day, but that was not the reason for John's great happiness and peace of mind. This Sunday was the last of his ministry in the little village church at Stoneleigh. He was going to the city that afternoon, and was leaving behind him very sad and unpleasant memories. The people had misunderstood him, and from the first, had regarded with eyes of disapproval the plain, sensitive, shabby man.

John had been gentle and patient during those months of hardship. He had struggled along on a mere pittance of a salary, and now he was about to receive his just reward. He had been offered the position of rector in a large, prominent city church. He knew that this new congregation would understand him and be with him. Stoneleigh was ignorant and unappreciative. The town folks lounged into church, some from force of habit, others because they considered it their duty, and wished to be prepared for eternity, and the world to come.

John, when he mounted the pulpit some time later, faced them, quietly smiling.

"This morning, although it is Christmas, I am going to speak to you on the eighth verse of the thirteenth chapter, First Corinthians, 'Charity never

faileth; but whether there be prophecies, they shall fail; whether there be tongues, they shall cease; whether there be knowledge, it shall vanish away.' ”

The congregation moved uneasily in their seats. The man before them, shabby and unimposing though he was, now commanded their strict attention.

“Charity means, Peace on earth, Good will to men,” John said, and his eyes were shining, and his voice very low and firm. Those who listened lowered their eyes, and wished they had not come.

Here was a new John, not the sensitive, shrinking John of old. This was not the man whom they had sneered at, and criticized so harshly, the man whose life they had made so miserable.

“And now abideth Faith, Hope, and Charity, these three; but the greatest of these is Charity.”

Charity! The word rang in the congregation's ears as they hurried out of the church. They carried with them a picture that would never fade from their minds. It was of a little man with a pale, careworn face, and mild blue eyes. A man who had suffered at their hands, but who in turn had taught them the Golden Rule, and a lesson in human kindness.



The Clown

*"He who grins in clown's disguise,
Often hides an aching heart.
Sadness, sometimes, worldly wise,
Dresses for a motley part.
Song and bells to cheat the ears,
Chalk and paint to hide the tears."*

ROBERT W. CHAMBERS.



HE WAS billed as Timento, the flying clown, but his friends had him nicknamed Tiny Tim. He was a pleasant little chap, quiet and sensitive, and always with a smile or kind word for everyone.

Big "Dan" Mallony, the manager of the Burton Brothers' Three Ring Circus, had Timento brought from Italy to Canada, where the show was playing a season of twenty-three weeks under canvas.

Timento's home on the shores of sunny Italy had been a particularly pleasant one, although the family was poor, and there had been a lot of younger brothers and sisters to be fed, clothed and schooled. Then, there was Rosetta, Timento's sweetheart, who had promised to wait for him; and some day Timento expected to return to her, very rich. His greatest dream was to build for Rosetta, the fairy-footed and gay of heart, a beautiful castle where they could live alone happily together.

Timento did not like America, nor did he like the hustle and bustle of circus life. He was true to his native land, and the demeanor of cheerfulness was entirely assumed. He longed for the day when he could say good-bye to the trapeze, and grease paint and artifice of it all, and go to Rosetta—and his old home.

Late one afternoon, Big "Dan" sent for Timento, and talked to him very sympathetically.

"I'm sorry, chappie, but I've got bad news for you," he said, and Timento saw that he held in his hand a letter edged in black.

"I've opened it, and your mother writes that Rosetta died last month."

Timento crept away into his tent, threw himself on his hard, little cot, and began to cry very quietly, but with the heart-breaking intensity of a lonely child.

Several hours later, he prepared to hide his tears beneath a coat of red and white paint. He faced an audience of merrymakers who laughed and clapped as he mounted a great bar from which he was to throw himself onto a nearby trapeze.

The audience yelled their approval, and then held their breath.

Timento with the speed of lightning leaped into the air, made no effort to catch the swing, and dropped a hundred feet to the ground below.

When they picked up the poor mangled form and washed the paint from his face, they saw a smile on his features—a smile of great contentment.

Tiny Tim had gone to join Rosetta.



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